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ABSTRACT

In this study, change over time in grandparenting experience, sex differences in grandparenting, and differences among relationships with different grandchildren were explored. Thirteen grandmothers and six grandfathers were interviewed; content analysis and thematic analysis of interview transcripts were performed. Grandparents described changes over time in activities with grandchildren, and in the satisfactions and stresses of grandparenting; in accounting for these changes, grandparents most often referred to age-related changes in grandchildren. Men and women differed in activities shared with grandchildren, in sources of satisfaction and stress in grandparenting, in the personal significance of grandparenting, and in changes over time in grandparenting experience. Finally, many grandparents behaved differently with grandsons and granddaughters, although most of these grandparents believed that boys and girls should be treated the same way. We conclude that grandparenting is most usefully viewed as a developmental process, that grandparents act as sex role socialization agents, and that the findings support a model of reciprocal structuring of the life cycle. (Author)

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CHANGE AND DIVERSITY
IN
GRANDPARENTING EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

In this study, change over time in grandparenting experience, sex differences in grandparenting, and differences among relationships with different grandchildren were explored. Thirteen grandmothers and six grandfathers were interviewed; content analysis and thematic analysis of interview transcripts were performed. Grandparents described changes over time in activities with grandchildren, and in the satisfactions and stresses of grandparenting; in accounting for these changes, grandparents most often referred to age-related changes in grandchildren. Men and women differed in activities shared with grandchildren, in sources of satisfaction and stress in grandparenting, in the personal significance of grandparenting, and in changes over time in grandparenting experience. Finally, many grandparents behaved differently with grandsons and granddaughters, although most of these grandparents believed that boys and girls should be treated the same way. We conclude that grandparenting is most usefully viewed as a developmental process, that grandparents act as sex role socialization agents, and that the findings support a model of reciprocal structuring of the life cycle.

Change and Diversity
in
Grandparenting Experience

According to recent surveys, most older Americans are grandparents, and most grandparents see their grandchildren often (Harris & Associates, 1975); thus, grandparenting is a typical experience of middle and later life. Given the prevalence of this experience, it is appropriate that scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied grandparenting. For example, family historians have discussed the impact of the "quickenings" of the family life cycle upon grandparent-grandchild relationships (Troll, 1971; 1975; 1980; Troll, Miller & Atchley, 1979), social gerontologists have examined grandparental role (e.g., Hill, 1965; Robertson, 1975), and sociologists and anthropologists have noted that grandparenting is an experience that varies across cultures and ethnic groups (e.g., Apple, 1956; Cohler & Grunebaum, 1981; Datan, Antonovsky, & Maoz, 1981; Hayes & Mindel, 1973). Psychological researchers have considered grandchildren's or grandparents' views of their relationships; in addition, several psychologists have identified age differences in these views (e.g., Kahana & Kahana, 1970; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Schultz, 1981; Robertson, 1977; Wood and Robertson, 1976).

Despite these varied approaches to the study of grandparenting, at least three issues have not yet been explored. First, earlier researchers have not directly examined change over time in grandparent-grandchild relationships, although several developmentalists have emphasized the need for such an examination (Bengtson & Black, 1973; Bengtson & Treas, 1980;

Brody, 1974; Cohler & Grunebaum, 1981; Hagestad & Speicher, 1981; Kivnick, 1981; 1982; Troll & Bengtson, 1979; 1982; Wood & Robertson, 1976). This failure to deliberately study change in grandparenting is especially surprising, since earlier researchers have found age differences in perceptions of grandparent-grandchild bonds. Second, investigators have not yet considered possible differences among a grandparent's relationships with different grandchildren, despite cautions that this, too, is an important research question (George, 1980; Troll, 1980). Finally, the majority of earlier studies report only grandmothers' experiences: with few exceptions (e.g., Crawford, 1981; Newgarten & Weinstein, 1964), data describing grandfathers and/or sex differences in grandparenting are sadly lacking.

This study was an exploratory investigation addressing these issues. Specifically, the research goals were (1) to identify perceptions of change over time in relationships with grandchildren, and perceptions of the sources of these changes, and (2) to identify perceptions of differences among relationships with different grandchildren, and perceptions of the bases of these differences. A secondary goal was the examination of sex differences in grandparenting.

Method

Participants

Thirteen grandmothers and six grandfathers, located through chain sampling, participated in the study; grandparents' ages ranged from 52 to 78. All had at least 2 grandchildren; 15 had grandchildren living in their own community, while the others had grandchildren living within 4 hours travel.

Although these grandparents formed a small and non-random sample, they showed diversity in demographic characteristics (see Table 1). Grandmothers' and grandfathers' demographic profiles differed in several respects. Typically, grandfathers were married, while half of the grandmothers were widowed or divorced. The grandfathers, as a group, had educational levels and incomes which exceeded those of the grandmothers. Finally, all of the grandfathers were retired, while nearly a third of the grandmothers were working outside of the home.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

The senior author conducted a semi-structured interview with each grandparent. Interview topics included grandparenting experiences, perceived change in these experiences, and perceived differences among relationships with different grandchildren; interview length ranged from 1½ to 3 hours. During interviews, each grandparent answered the same questions in the same order; however, all questions were open-ended, and follow up questions and probe questions were used to encourage grandparents to emphasize personally relevant issues in responding.

The procedures reflected the exploratory nature of the research. In exploratory studies, intensive examination of a small group of respondents and procedural flexibility are essential in order to identify issues. This information can guide the design of subsequent research, in which hypotheses relevant to participants -- as well as investigators -- are tested.

Treatment of Data

Each tape recorded interview was transcribed verbatim; transcripts were analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis. In the content analysis, responses were grouped into dissimilar categories identified on the basis of examination of all responses to a particular question. In the thematic analysis, issues recurring within individual interviews and within the set of interviews were identified and described.

The senior author performed both the content analysis and the thematic analysis. In addition, two reliability judges re-analyzed randomly selected sub-samples of interview transcripts. Inter-judge reliabilities for the content analysis and for the thematic analysis were .87 and .93, respectively.

Findings

The findings are described as categories of grandparents' responses, except when the percentage of men and women responding in a category differed by at least 10%.

Change Over Time in Grandparenting Experience

Grandparents noted a variety of transformations in relationships with grandchildren; these changes are outlined in Table 2. Not surprisingly, activities with grandchildren changed. Over half of the grandparents said that outings became more frequent when grandchildren reached preschool age, or that outings grew less frequent as grandchildren approached adolescence and made more local trips with peers. In addition, over four fifths of the grandmothers and all grandfathers reported changes in the ways that they entertained grandchildren during visits, specifying changes in games or in conversation and storytelling. Most grandmothers and half of the grandfathers had found that caretaking and babysitting grew less frequent

as grandchildren matured. Finally, a few grandparents said that activities with some grandchildren had not changed, either because it was too early in the child's development for change to appear or because contact with the child was too infrequent for awareness of change (see Table 2)

Insert Table 2 about here

Since activities with grandchildren changed, there were also changes in the satisfactions of grandparenting (see Table 2). Nearly a quarter of the grandparents found outings more enjoyable, as well as more frequent, when grandchildren were past infancy. Approximately half of the grandmothers and two thirds of the grandfathers noted that they enjoyed reading and conversing during visits, rather than physical play, as grandchildren grew. In addition, approximately a third of the grandmothers, who enjoyed babysitting, found fewer opportunities for this sort of satisfaction during and after the elementary school years; similarly, a third of the grandfathers, who had enjoyed cuddling their preschool-aged grandchildren, noted with regret that the children grew less affectionate during the same age period. As with changes in shared activities, a few grandparents had not noticed changes in sources of enjoyment of some grandchildren, again offering youth of the grandchild or infrequent contact as an explanation (see Table 2).

Finally, grandparents noted changes in irritations with grandchildren (see Table 2). For two thirds of the grandmothers and one third of the grandfathers, annoyances stemmed from grandchildren's disobedience and carelessness, and these problems arose more frequently as the grandchildren grew. A fourth of the grandmothers and two thirds of the grandfathers, who

disliked grandchildren's disobedience or dangerous behavior, believed that their grandchildren had grown less irritating. Finally, a quarter of the grandmothers suspected that although their youngest grandchildren did not now aggravate them, annoyances would emerge as these children grew older. Once again, a few grandparents were not aware of change in irritations with some grandchildren, as these grandchildren were quite young or were seen infrequently (see Table 2).

In accounting for the changes in relationships with grandchildren, grandparents most often referred to development in grandchildren's abilities and interests, as well as their own accommodations to these transformations. Grandparents noted that certain activities with grandchildren -- such as conversations and outings -- were not possible, practical, or enjoyable until grandchildren had attained a certain level of maturation. They also pointed out that grandchildren's preferred activities changed with age, and that, in order to maintain harmony in the relationship, they themselves adjusted to these age-related preference changes. As one man explained, "if you're going to be a good grandfather, you'd better grow up along with them." Three grandparents also cited the impact of their own aging: these grandparents said that decreasing physical strength, agility, or financial resources had or would influence activities with grandchildren. Finally, one grandfather referred to the impact of social change upon his activities with grandchildren, stating that "as the times change, the things you do with anyone change."

Sex Differences in Grandparenting

Women and men differed in current grandparenting experiences; these differences are summarized in Table 3. All of the grandfathers, but only

disliked grandchildren's disobedience or dangerous behavior, believed that their grandchildren had grown less irritating. Finally, a quarter of the grandmothers suspected that although their youngest grandchildren did not now aggravate them, annoyances would emerge as these children grew older. Once again, a few grandparents were not aware of change in irritations with some grandchildren, as these grandchildren were quite young or were seen infrequently (see Table 2).

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Sex Differences in Grandparenting

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70% of the grandmothers reported that they enjoyed outings with grandchildren; half of the grandmothers, but no grandfathers, reported especially enjoying babysitting. There were no sex differences in reported enjoyment of games, conversation, and reading stories during visits, or in enjoyment of displays of affection.

Insert Table 3 about here

Grandmothers and grandfathers helped grandchildren in different ways (see Table 3). Half of the grandmothers, but only a third of the grandfathers, said that they assisted grandchildren in resolving family conflicts, and nearly a third of the grandmothers reported that they helped by comforting young grandchildren after minor injuries. Half of the grandfathers reported giving grandchildren practical help (i.e., toy repairs, loans of money), while less than a quarter of the grandmothers said that they provided this type of assistance. Both men and women reported helping grandchildren by advising about appropriate or adaptive behavior (see Table 3).

There were also sex differences in the personal significance of grandparenting (see Table 3). Although enjoyment of grandchildren and the extension of the family were important to men and women alike, grandfathers often described grandparenting as an experience leading to personal growth; grandmothers more often believed that becoming a grandparent was a reflection of their children's personal growth. All of the grandfathers -- but only 70% of the grandmothers -- reported changes in self concept since grandchildren's birth; these changes included increased patience, increased irritability, and greater ease in expressing affection.

Finally, nearly all respondents had different perceptions of grandmothers' and grandfathers' relationships with grandchildren (see Table 3). Four fifths of the grandmothers and two thirds of the grandfathers believed that men and women entertained grandchildren differently, or that grandmothers performed more caretaking activities. A quarter of the grandparents felt, in addition, that grandmothers were more patient and affectionate with grandchildren than were grandfathers.

Sex differences in perceived change over time in grandparenting experience have already been noted (see Table 2).

Grandsons and Granddaughters

Grandparents viewed their relationships with different grandchildren as unique bonds, and one factor important in distinguishing relationships was sex of the grandchild; Table 4 outlines these differences. Most grandmothers felt that they should treat grandsons and granddaughters the same way; in contrast, most grandfathers believed that boys and girls should be treated differently. Two thirds of the grandparents, in discussing behavior towards grandsons and granddaughters, added that they guarded against showing favoritism toward any of their grandchildren.

- - - - -
Insert Table 4 about here
- - - - -

Often, reported behavior toward grandsons and granddaughters contradicted egalitarian ideals (see Table 4). Over four fifths of the grandmothers and two thirds of the grandfathers had given granddaughters frilly dresses, dolls, or cosmetics as gifts, while their gifts to grandsons had included toy cars, trucks, or trains; over half of these grandparents had said that boys and girls should be treated the same way. Similarly, a fourth of the

grandparents played house or played with dolls with granddaughters, but played football or basketball with grandsons; 60% of these grandparents had said that the treatment of boys and girls should not differ. Other grandparents showed less conformity to sex-role norms in behavior toward grandchildren (see Table 4).

Nine grandparents' views of appropriate treatment of boys and girls had not changed with time (see Table 4). However, three grandparents said that they had only begun to behave differently toward grandsons and granddaughters as the children had matured and developed different interests, and seven additional grandparents expected this change when grandchildren were older. In contrast, one grandfather found that he was able to treat his 9 year old grandson and 6 year old granddaughter more similarly now than he had when the children were younger.

Discussion and Conclusions

In considering the study findings, we reach three conclusions. First, there is clear support for a developmental model of grandparenting. Second, respondents' reports also support a view of grandparents as sex-role socialization agents. Finally, these perspectives of grandparenting further suggest a notion of reciprocal structuring of the life cycle.

Grandparents' descriptions of change over time in activities with grandchildren, in the satisfactions of having grandchildren, and in the stresses of grandparenting all suggest that this experience is most usefully viewed as a developmental process -- that is, as a phenomenon inherently characterized by change. Grandparents cuddled and cared for infant grandchildren; later, grandparents began to play games and converse with preschool grandchildren -- as well as to cope with the children's

emerging self assertion and disobedience. During middle childhood, grandchildren grew more compliant than disobedient, and grandparent and grandchild now helped one another. Adolescent grandchildren -- like preschoolers -- were described as defiant, but grandparents and adolescent grandchildren continued to exchange assistance and companionship.

The notion that a relationship survives through continual change is certainly far from radical; recognition of this notion is important, however, as it prompts a search for the origins and influences of change. To the grandparents, the primary influence was the grandchild's maturation: respondents described themselves as accommodating to changes in grandchildren's interests and abilities. Undoubtedly, the children's growth was an important source of change in grandparenting; we believe, however, that grandchildren's development was only one of several bases of transformation.

A second source was the grandparents' aging. A few grandparents discussed the actual or potential impact of their own aging; other signs of this impact were also apparent. Grandparents' perception that changes in relationships with grandchildren represented their own accommodations to the children's growth -- rather than their own actions as agents of change -- can be understood as a reflection of a passive mastery psychosocial orientation (Gutmann, 1975; 1977). According to Gutmann (1975; 1977), aging, at least for men, involves a shift from an orientation of active mastery -- characterized by agency and independence -- to an orientation of passive mastery -- reflected in increased receptivity and passive affiliation. Gutmann (1975; 1977) also proposes that aging for women reflects the reverse sequence -- a movement from a passive mastery to an active mastery orientation. In this study, however, both grandmothers and grandfathers

described changes in relationships with grandchildren in a manner consistent with passive mastery.

Respondents emphasis upon grandparenting as a source of their own or their children's personal growth conforms to Erikson's (1963) view of a sense of generativity. Grandparents found that their own development had been fostered through their involvement with succeeding generations, and/or described the growth of generational successors as a process of great personal import. Alternatively, these statements of the personal significance of grandparenting illustrate the role of the family life cycle in regulating the individual life cycle (Neugarten, 1968), as the development of grandparents' families was viewed as a source of change for either individual grandparents or their children. In summary, we propose that grandparenting should be studied as a developmental process reflecting growth of the grandchild, of the grandparent, and of the family.

Our second conclusion -- that these grandparents acted as sex-role socialization agents -- stems, first, from the reported sex differences in grandparenting: these grandparents provided models of distinct attitudes and behavior for men and women. This conclusion is also based upon reported differences between behavior toward grandsons and granddaughters: through these differences, grandparents supported grandchildren's conformity to sex-role norms. Viewing grandparents as agents of change in their grandchildren suggests further that men and women may display both passive and active psychosocial orientations in later life. We propose, then, that aging is accompanied by more diversified means of confronting the social world, rather than a simple sex-role reversal of these means, as Gutmann (1975; 1977) proposed. We also note that

perspective of grandparenting yields a pessimistic prospect for parents with egalitarian childrearing ideals: the most sincere and consistent striving for androgyny within the nuclear family may well be thwarted by the influence of more conventional extended family members.

Given our conclusions that grandparenting is a developmental process and that grandparents function as sex-role socialization agents, we offer as a third conclusion a model of reciprocal structuring of the life cycle. We have noted ways in which grandchildren's growth transformed grandparents' experience, as well as ways in which grandparents influenced grandchildren's development: from the grandparents' perspective, grandchildren's growth determined the nature of their relationship; however, grandparents' aging also had an important influence on these relationships, and grandparents' socialization function shaped grandchildren's growth. Thus, there is a pattern of bidirectional determination between the age-related changes of infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and those of later adulthood.

As is often the case, the findings of this study yield not only conclusions, but also questions to be answered through further research. The impact of grandparents' aging requires further study: specifically, the ways in which normative transitions of later life -- such as widowhood and retirement -- affect grandparent-grandchild relationships should be examined. In addition, continued study of sex differences in grandparenting and of differences in behavior toward grandsons and granddaughters should be implemented; it would be especially helpful to include corroborative reports from spouses, grandchildren, or children, or behavioral observations, to supplement grandparents' reports. It is important, as well, that the

cross-cultural and/or cross-cohort generality of the present findings be explored. With these sorts of information, we should attain a basis for a more detailed understanding of grandparent-grandchild relationships.

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Footnote

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Grandparents

	Grandmothers n = 13	Grandfathers n = 6
Mean Age (Age Range)	58.9 (52-70)	69.7 (63-78)
<u>Marital Status:</u>		
Married	7	5
Widowed	4	1
Divorced	2	0
<u>Education:</u>		
12 years or less	7	0
1-4 years college	5	3
graduate degree	1	3
<u>Annual Family Income:</u>		
under \$5000	2	0
\$6 - 10,000	3	0
\$10 - 15,000	0	1
\$16 - 20,000	1	3
\$21 - 25,000	2	0
over \$26,000	5	2
<u>Occupation:</u>		
Currently working	4	0
Retired	0	6
Full-time homemaker	9	0

Table 2
Change over Time in Grandparenting Experience

<u>Type of Change Reported</u>	<u>Grandmothers n = 13</u>	<u>Grandfathers n = 6</u>
<u>Activities with grandchildren:</u>		
Outings	8	4
Home Entertainment	11	6
Babysitting/Caretaking	11	3
None	3	1
<u>Sources of Satisfaction:</u>		
Outings	4	1
Home Entertainment	6	4
Babysitting/Caretaking	4	0
Expressing Affection	0	2
None	6	2
<u>Irritations in Grandparenting:</u>		
More Frequent Now	8	2
Less Frequent Now	3	4
Expected in the Future	3	0
None	5	2

Note: Total number of responses exceeds 19 because of multiple responses per grandparent.

Table 3
Sex Differences in Grandparenting

<u>Type of Sex Difference</u>	<u>Grandmothers n = 13</u>	<u>Grandfathers n = 6</u>
<u>Current Sources of Satisfaction:</u>		
Outings	9	6
Babysitting/Caretaking	6	0
Home Entertainment	13	6
Expressing Affection	3	1
<u>Assistance to Grandchildren:</u>		
Resolving Family Conflicts	7	2
Comfort after Injury	4	0
Practical Help	4	3
Advising	3	1
<u>Personal Significance of Grandparenting:</u>		
Personal Growth	2	2
Children's Growth	6	1
Enjoyment of Grandchildren	10	4
Extension of Family	3	2
Changed Self Concept	9	6
<u>Perceived Sex Differences in Grandparenting:</u>		
Different Activities	11	4
Different Attitudes	3	2

Note: Total number of responses exceeds 19 because of multiple responses per grandparent.

Table 4

Differences Between Relationships with Grandsons and with Granddaughters

<u>Type of Distinction</u>	<u>Grandmothers n = 13</u>	<u>Grandfathers n = 6</u>
<u>Reported Ideals:</u>		
Should not Treat Differently	9	2
Should Treat Differently	3	4
Should not Favor	8	4
<u>Reported Behavior:</u>		
Sex-Typed Gifts	11	4
Same Gifts	2	2
Sex-Typed Games	3	2
Same Games	8	3
<u>Changes in Distinctions:</u>		
None (Constant Sex-Typing)	5	2
None (Never Sex-Typing)	1	1
Increased Distinction	2	1
Expect Increased Distinction	5	2
Decreased Distinction	0	1

Note: Total number of responses exceeds 19 because of multiple responses per grandparent.